PublicEye

By Cara DeGette

Putting leadership to the test

Who is running this city?

This should be an easy question to answer: The City Charter mandates the popularly elected mayor and the City Council to make policy decisions.

Sometimes the job requires a heavy dose of courage. And courage is often what distinguishes the principled statesman from the rest of those dime-a-dozen pandering, power-seeking, self-serving, ladder-climbing politicians.

On Tuesday, Feb. 10, the City Council's mettle will be put to the test. Then they are scheduled to vote on what should be a routine measure to extend health insurance benefits to the family members of employees working for the city. In a nutshell, the program would allow employees to add an adult child or parent who lives with them, or their significant other, to the city's health plan. The cost to taxpayers would be near zero, as the employee would pay 100 percent of the insurance premiums.

Note to Radford: We want to barf.

In a region where an estimated 50,000 people have no health insurance, this would appear to be a no-brainer. But, a bit of background is in order. In November 2002, the City Council approved a policy that extended insurance benefits to gay and lesbian partners of city employees, but not unmarried committed couples or other family members living at home.

The anti-gay Colorado Springs-based ministry Focus on the Family mobilized and, last April, voters ushered in a new City Council that quickly axed the same-sex benefits. At the time, council members said the measure placed undue burden on taxpayers and also complained the doomed benefits program unfairly excluded other uninsured family members living at home.

Recognizing the dangers of being relabeled an intolerant city, business and economic development leaders crafted a new, inclusive benefits plan that would cost the taxpayers nothing. (In the spirit of full disclosure, the *Independent*'s publisher **John Weiss** was a driving force behind the new plan.)

But, the proposal was tabled in November after the City Council — whose members are paid $6,250 a year — deadlocked on a 4-4 vote. Supporters, by the way, included **Larry Small, Scott Hente, Jerry Heimlicher** and **Richard Skorman**. Notably, Councilwoman **Margaret Radford** — who had initially praised the proposal — got cold feet and switched her vote to a "no," indicating that she plans to run as a Republican for a $63,200-a-year seat on the Board of County Commissioners this November. She was worried that voting for an equitable city insurance plan would hurt her chances. (Note to Radford: We want to barf.)

At the time, Focus on the Family decided to take no formal position on the inclusive city insurance program. But now, the nonprofit — which is by law prohibited from endorsing specific political candidates — apparently thinks it runs this town.

This week, the ministry issued a bizarre five-page veiled threat to members of Council, accusing the city of "pro-homosexual bias." The manifesto, which accused the city of "just another attempt to redefine family," was so misleading and inaccurate that the city's human resources department issued a point-by-point correction (the Focus memo, as well as the city's responses, can be read in full by accessing this column online at www.csindy.com).

It includes such sweeping statements as this:

"We believe that this plan is driven by the desire to extend healthcare benefits on the basis of sexual orientation. This is an inequitable goal. ... Any further attempt to tweak this program to satisfy homosexual activists will result in another failed effort."

To which the city's HR department responded: "The [program] is not a statement about marriage, the church, or the family. The program is about addressing the needs of a workforce."

Conservative Councilman Heimlicher is appalled. Elected last year, Heimlicher helped kill the city's same-sex benefits program because of its inequities and because of its costs to taxpayers.

Now, he is calling for other statesmen — and the city's more rational-minded religious and business leaders — to step forward and help stop this nonsense.

"What we are trying to do is repair the image of this city as intolerant," Heimlicher said. "What we are doing with this new venture is to give adult parents and children and partners of employees an insurance program that treats everyone the same.

"By the way," he adds, "I'm not in agreement with the gay and lesbian lifestyle, and I'm also not in agreement with the shacking-up lifestyle, but we can't keep our heads in the sand, folks."

We'll find out on Feb. 10 whether our elected officials are willing to see beyond Focus on the Family's smoke and mirrors — or whether we should just change the City Charter and officially put the ministry in charge of City Hall.

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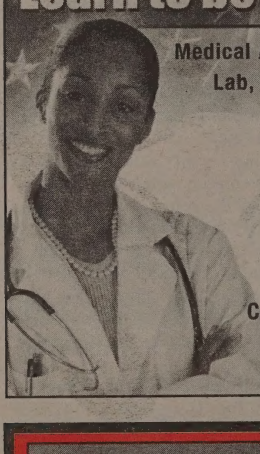

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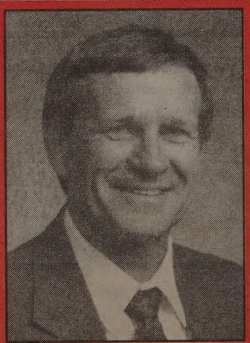

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